

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 003438

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SADRIST PARLIAMENTARIAN WORRIES ABOUT NATIONAL UNITY

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT FORD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Sadrist Parliamentarian Sami Jasim Attiyah al-Askari told PolCouns on August 20 that no more than three provinces should be permitted to form a region. Askeri, who is from An-Nasiriyah, said that many Shia fear that Najaf and Karbala would dominate a single region encompassing all Shia-majority provinces. Southern Iraqis would want more local rule. He further argued that it would be easier for Iran to exert its influence over one Shia region rather than several. He evinced skepticism about the utility of regional units in general, a viewpoint he said many in the Shia Coalition share. He also conceded that much of the pressure from Basrah to form a region was easing now that it was clear it would not mean an immediate oil revenue bonanza. (Comment: Sadr-associated groups organized small demonstrations in Baghdad and Samawa against federalism on August 20. End Comment.)

¶2. (C) In response to our probing about the importance to the Shia Coalition of keeping de-Baathification language in the constitution, Askeri at first called it essential. Many Shia, he said, worry that without the permanent constitution legalizing the de-Baath commission, it might disappear. PolCouns noted that the existing transitional national assembly could also just pass a law defining the status of the de-Baath commission. This would enable the constitution to avoid mentioning the de-Baath commission while keeping the body functioning. In this way, it might be possible to attract some more Sunni Arab support for the draft constitution. Askeri understood the logic and concluded this might be workable for the Shia. (Comment: Askeri is one of the most vehement anti-Baathists in the current assembly. End Comment.)

¶3. (C) Askeri mentioned there is also some unease among the Shia about the general direction of Iraq and the risks of the country coming apart. Kurdish insistence on control of oil does not bode well, he mentioned. Pointing to the Kurdish insistence on the continuation of the pesh merga, Askeri observed that regional security forces under local control would merit careful treatment. He anticipated that a Shia region would quickly follow the Kurdish lead and form "local security forces" loyal not to Baghdad but to the regional government center. These forces might be little more than political-party based militias, he speculated. Any disputes between regions, such as border and water disputes, could lead to local armed clashes. He was especially concerned about the disputed border between Sunni-dominated Al-Anbar and neighboring Shia provinces, highlighting problems between Anbar and Karbala and Babil. He discounted the possibility of armed conflict between different Shia "local security" groups, saying that there are no important border disputes among Shia-majority provinces.

¶4. (C) Askeri recommended that it would be important to limit the size and shape of regional security forces, allowing them to have only weapons needed for "internal security." He said that regional militias should not be allowed to possess tanks, artillery and aircraft. He claimed to believe that local security forces should be loyal to regional governments, not political parties. (COMMENT: He made no specific reference to the future of the Sadrist "Mahdi Militia." END COMMENT)

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